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INTEGRATION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Written statement submitted by Freedom House, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[9 April 1999]

GE.99-12067 (E)

Violence against Women in Egypt

1. In 1997 there were 600 reported cases of illegal, manipulated or coerced marriages in Egypt. We wish to bring to the attention of the Commission the urgent situation of one such case that involves a 16-year-old Coptic girl, Suhir Shihata Gouda, from Abu-Tisht in southern Egypt. We are deeply concerned about what appears to be a pattern of abduction and violence against women and children, in some incidents with the complicity of Egyptian police.

2. On 14 March, Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom received the following memorandum written by Samir Shihata, the brother of the abducted girl:

> "I have a 16-year-old sister and her name is Suhir Shihata Gouda, an 11th grade student at the Abu-Tisht Secondary School of Commerce. My father was shocked when my sister did not return home from school on 26 February 1999. We searched for her at her friend's and relatives' houses. An eyewitness told my father that he saw [Suhir] with our neighbour Saed Sadek Mahmoud, as he and other men took her away in a taxi. My father then rushed to the Abu-Tisht police station to report the incident. What happened next is unconscionable. A police officer then started assaulting and beating my father, cursing him with words I am ashamed to repeat. Since my father is an old man and was afraid [of further police brutality], he returned home and the case was never recorded. Three days later, my father and brother went back to the police station, and the same treatment [beating] was repeated on both. Since that day, my father has been lying in a hospital bed at the Dr. Qassab's hospital as a result of injuries he incurred at the police station... . Our mother is in much suffering because she does not know the status of her daughter.
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> "On Monday, 8 March 1999, Mr. Saed Sadek Mahmoud came to our house along with ... [names of 21 individuals are available at Freedom House].
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> "They ... surrounded our house and threatened [to harm us] if we took any legal action. They said to us 'your daughter has declared her Islamization at al-Azhar mosque'. They also said that Mr. Abdul-Hady al-Saman al-Delyou would get her married to one of his acquaintances. We then informed the police of what was said. They [the police] attempted to enter our town, but Abdul-Hady al-Saman al-Delyou and his followers blocked the road in front of the police cars and said to them: 'if you try to enter the town, we will kill all the Christians in the town and burn their houses ... we will take away all of their women and young girls'. The police cars then retreated.
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> "The following day, the State Security Investigators [SSI] went to see him [Abdul-Hady al-Saman al-Delyou]. We then learned that they [the SSI] pressured her into marrying one of al-Delyou's followers ... ." 1/

1/ Translation from Arabic text, Center for Religious Freedom, Freedom House, 14 March 1999. Text within brackets is interpolated by Freedom House for clarification.

3. Freedom House received subsequent reports that Suhir sought to escape her captors but was caught and badly beaten, and that she has attempted suicide.

4. In a number of cases that Freedom House has investigated in Egypt, other young girls, such as Teresa Andrawes from Giza, near Cairo, have also been taken to be forcibly converted and married, often with the cooperation of the local police. Some have involved girls below the age at which, under Egyptian law, a person can marry or change his or her religion.

5. Freedom House is also concerned by reports that women and girls in Abu-Tisht are living in daily fear of being abducted. Freedom House demand Suhir's immediate return to her family, the investigation and prosecution of her abductors, and adequate police protection for the women of Abu-Tisht.

6. Freedom House urges the Special Rapporteur on violence against women to investigate the case of Suhir Shihata Gouda as well as the similar case of Teresa Andrawes, and the hundreds of other reports of abduction and forcible conversion.